

## TEACHING AGAINST THE GRAIN: ENACTING CONSTRUCTIVIST BELIEFS WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL

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### ABSTRACT

*This study addresses the work of individual teacher educators improvising with the content and pedagogy of their courses and looks at the teaching and learning that occurs when teacher educators explicitly change and engage in a new pedagogy. This study purports to document, analyze, and interpret the learning that occurred across two university literacy courses in which faculty implemented a constructivist, critical literacy pedagogy. Findings explore what it means to share power in the classroom and the relationships between critical teaching and developing a literacy theory of practice.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Beliefs and Practices of the Institution*

*Day after day up there beating my wings*

*With all of the softness truth requires*

*I feel them shrug whenever I pause:*

*They class my voice among tentative things,*

*And they credit fact, force, battering.*

*I dance my way toward the family of knowing,*

*Embracing stray error as a long-lost boy*

*And bringing him home with my fluttering.*

*Every quick feather asserts a just claim;*

*It bites like saw into white pine.*

*I communicate right; but explain to the dean*

*Well, Right has a long and intricate name.*

*And the saying of it is a lonely thing.*

*-William Stafford, Teacher*

And the saying of it is a lonely thing. Stafford's words speak to the implications of radical teacher pedagogies played out within traditional institutions of learning. As professors become risk takers and explore new ways of teaching and learning, these practices are often not fully understood by colleagues across the university as well as within schools of education. Co-constructing syllabi, student questioning driving learning, negotiating assignments, privileging talk in classrooms over coverage of content are certainly not the stuff of learning in many college

classrooms where delivery of curriculum receives highest priority; and also not the stuff of learning in today's climate of teacher accountability, standards based teaching, research-evidenced practice, and mandated assessments. Indeed, it often seems that political agendas of well-meant programs such as NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education), state licensure requirements, and teacher education programs preclude changes in the way that we prepare teachers (Kelly, 2004). Yet, changes are beginning to emerge some through top-down reforms in policy, some through dialogue among teachers educators and colleagues across the university community, and some through the work of individual teacher educators improvising with the content and pedagogy of their courses (Kelly, 2004).

This study addresses the latter and looks at the teaching and learning that occurs when teacher educators explicitly change and engage in a new pedagogy. Two literacy professors situated in the Department of Reading in the College of Education, argue that there exists a more effective way to engage university students in meaningful learning both undergraduate and graduate that will lead to a deeper grappling with ideas and a more meaningful understanding of course content. They move from the traditional didactic classrooms that characterize much of the university and take a different approach to teaching and learning to explore the possibilities of a constructivist

classroom.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Constructivism

The researchers embrace two theoretical paradigms in articulating their constructivist pedagogy: constructivism and critical literacy. First, in order to fully understand the researchers' constructivist teaching model, it may be helpful to consider the meaning of constructivism. Although philosophers have suggested multiple "constructivisms" (Nola, 1997), two are particularly relevant to the field of education - *cognitive constructivism* and *social or cultural constructivism* (Windschitl, 2002). While the authors briefly present an explanation of *cognitive constructivism*, their research embraces the *social constructivist* model.

Piaget (1971) suggests that *cognitive constructivism* consists of explanations of how learners, as individuals, change and refine knowledge based upon experience, instruction, and other influences that mediate understanding (Windschitl, 2002). This perspective foregrounds the intellectual activity of individuals and presents challenges to the teacher in that he/she must help the students reconcile individual understandings with the canonical knowledge of the various disciplines (Windschitl, 2002). This perspective often ignores the co-construction of new understandings that may stray from the accepted canonical content knowledge.

*Social constructivism* looks at knowledge primarily as a cultural or social product (Vygotsky, 1978). Wells (1992) defines social constructivism as knowledge gained through the "constructive mental activity of the individual learner; a process of knowledge which is essentially social and cultural in nature and mediated and facilitated by cultural practices and artifacts of which the most important is discourse" (p. 286). Knowledge is shared and evolves through participation in various communities of practice (Cole, 1990; Scribner, 1985). In the social constructivist pedagogical model, teachers hold canonical knowledge (that was argued as to be political, multifaceted and thus questioned) and orchestrate classrooms wherein students participate in activities

relevant to that discipline using instructional tools that can promote co-construction of knowledge among learners (Roth, 1995). In the social constructivist model of learning, schools and classrooms become learning communities wherein students might work in small research groups becoming experts on aspect of a topic. These groups routinely share their expertise with others, allowing all to master ideas about content. Characteristics of social constructivist classrooms include individual responsibility linked with community sharing with the explicit expectation that learning occurs as individuals work collaboratively. Multiple ways of discourse such as questioning, critiques, and discussions are evident in these classrooms. (Brown & Campione, 1990, 1994).

### 1.2 Critical Literacy

The second theoretical perspective around which the researchers frame their work is critical literacy. In both classroom contexts, the authors make explicit the importance of reading texts with a critical and questioning stance. They want students to look beyond the "hows" and "whys" of teaching literacy to the transforming power that enables learners to see themselves as contributors to their own cultures (Freire, 1988; McLaren & Leonard, 1995). They argue that their students need to think critically about literacy content knowledge, its implications for society, and learning itself. And as critical teachers - whose responsibility with the students becomes that of mutually creating dialogue - they struggle to become problem-posers who ask thought-provoking questions and invite students to do the same (Shor, 1993).

The authors embrace Rosenblatt's (1978) theory and vision that their students, teachers and future teachers would become critical thinkers and emotionally open-minded individuals who yearn the will to create a happier way of life for themselves and others. In espousing a critical literacy, their goals become action-driven. Course content, although important, takes on new meaning as they help students to discover hidden political implications of literacy practices that maintain the status quo and perpetuate educational inequities. Thus, according to the authors, *critical* means much more than

the ability to use higher level thinking and assume an evaluative stance when interpreting texts. In this work, *critical literacy* refers explicitly and *only* to the times when teachers and students grapple with texts in order to further understand the ideological bases of literacies, the inequitable access to literacies, and ways to enhance the empowerment of the subordinated or marginalized (Lankshear & McLaren, 1991).

## 2. Background of the Study

Although the authors embraced the beliefs of social constructivist theory, they struggled to translate these ideas into practice in university literacy courses. Their work in two areas outside of the university provided much insight into the "how" of constructivist practice: the Coalition of Essential Schools, a twenty year school reform movement begun by Ted Sizer and the ABC's model for culturally relevant pedagogy (Schmidt, 2006). Interestingly, it was at this intersection that the collaborative inquiry began. The second author of this paper had worked first with the ABC's model, eventually introducing its framework to the first author. Both the researchers experimented in the college classrooms, asking students to learn about 'self' through autobiographies and to learn about others' through interview and biography writing. The possibilities of the ABC's framework to the further understanding of diversity and to create closer classroom communities intrigued both the researchers.

Concurrently, the first author began a three year involvement with the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools in Maryland. The beliefs of Coalition schools embodied in the Ten Common Principles (Sizer, 1984) made much sense as the authors became increasingly dissatisfied with their university teaching. They embraced core beliefs such as learning to use one's mind well, depth of study versus coverage of curriculum, student-as-worker and teacher-as-coach, and multiple ways to demonstrate mastery of content intrigued them. The first author brought back her learning from the work with teacher change and school reform; together the authors shared ways they could change their teaching.

The researchers began to understand more clearly Well's (1992) argument for the importance of discourse and they experienced the impact of talk. "What is knowledge?" they queried. "And whose knowledge is privileged in our classrooms?" They looked for evidence of student voice in their classrooms and found little.

## 3. The Study

The research, addresses the authors' struggles as they sought to define a constructivist practice within the constraints of their particular contexts. The study is two-dimensional: first, it looks at the shifting beliefs that evolve through talk and reflection during and after the study; and secondly, it documents students' beliefs and understandings of literacy knowledge as they interact in a dialogic, constructivist classroom.

The research addresses the following questions: a) In what ways do student beliefs about teaching literacy that develop over the course of the semester evidence a shift from passive receivers of instruction to co-constructors of a collaboratively mediated body of knowledge?, b) What do students' evolving theories of practice tell about who they are and what they value as educators?, c) What new understandings of literacy teaching and learning do teacher educators gain when they take an inquiry stance on their practice?, and d) What are the possibilities and constraints of enacting a constructivist literacy pedagogy in a traditional institution driven by adherence to standards and curriculum?

The authors explored these questions across two semesters and in two courses. The first author's study takes place in a graduate course, *Teaching Reading to Exceptional Children*. The second author's study occurs in an undergraduate course, *Using Children's Literature in a Reading and Writing Classroom*. Two different courses, two different populations; yet, both embrace a critical, constructivist pedagogy. This parallel provides a similar set of beliefs that guided the teaching of both courses.

### 3.1 Framing a Course with an Essential Question and a Provocative Proposition

The authors thought more about the idea of generating

big questions by asking big questions. In the first author's Coalition work with school reform and teacher change much emphasis is given to developing essential or central questions for areas of study. Simon, Director of research and professional development at the Coalition of Essential Schools in Oakland, CA argues that educators (under pressure to cover content and fearful of controversy) often avoid classroom talk around questions of profound importance to students and society (2002). She suggests that a central part of a teachers' job is to facilitate deliberation and talk about complex moral (and often political) issues.

Intrigued by the possibilities of framing a college course around a central question and a thought-provoking proposition, the first-author re-created the traditional graduate course, *Teaching Reading to Exceptional Children*. The story of her research follows. Further, it was through informal conversations during the first author's course that the second author expressed an interest in conducting a similar study, albeit with undergraduate students in a literature course. The second author's story combined with the first author's findings and provides further insights into the challenges and possibilities of teaching critical literacy in a constructivist classroom.

## 4. Two Stories

### 4.1 *Catching the Forgotten Ones*

*By "teacher" I mean someone who engages learners... And, having engaged the learners, finds his questions to be the same as those a researcher into the nature of human learning wants to ask: What do you think and why? While students learn, the teacher learns, too.*

*Duckworth, 1997*

Sixteen teachers and their instructor embarked on a new way of learning that would prove unsettling yet affirming, risky yet challenging, and rigorous yet rewarding. "Catching the Forgotten Ones" tells this story. Duckworth's words, quoted above, provide the underlying beliefs that the first author, and ultimately her students, embrace after the course experience.

*Understanding the Course*

*Teaching Reading to Exceptional Children* is a graduate

education course whose primary purpose as stated in the Department of Reading syllabus read: "to present the philosophy of reading to exceptional children along with appropriate methods and materials." Course description addressed the specific nature and needs of exceptional children and related these needs to the theory and practice of reading instruction. The course focused on students with mild to moderate disorders (e.g. sensory, mental, and physical health impairments, behavioral disorders and communication handicaps). Content knowledge dominated the teaching of the course; however, since the course met only once weekly for fourteen classes, comprehensive coverage of all content became problematic and most instructors simply lecture as the most efficient way to cover material.

### *Changing the Course*

Given the course requirements, the first author's dilemma found ways to reconcile course content coverage with her beliefs about constructivist classrooms and critical literacy. Understanding the risky nature of such a marriage of ideas, she nevertheless changed the course from one of content delivery to one of provocative questioning and critique, focusing on what schools today are doing to help children who struggle with reading and writing. Additionally, although the course emphasis is on children, classified either as special education or as needing 504 special accommodation plans, the first author included all children who failed to meet the *proficient* level as determined by the "No Child Left Behind Act" and mandated state assessments. Trying to understand her thinking, she saw contradiction. She wrote in the early stages of the course:

*In one sense, it becomes my course, - a reality that seems antithetical to the notion of constructivist teacher. But I wanted to open with a political agenda as an attempt to push my students quickly to considering and adopting a critical perspective on course readings and discussions. Thus the essential question and provocative proposition. I did not want students to simply passively accept information. I wanted them to question their own schools to see*



*what was really happening with reading instruction.*

This notion that the course is the first author's agenda - the instructor's, not the students' continued to trouble throughout the semester. Would making such agenda explicit ease student transition from passive to active co-constructors of learning? This remained a question that the first author revisited at the end of her study.

## *Listening to Student Voices: Course Assignments as Invitations for Questioning and Critique*

Despite ongoing concerns about the teacher-imposed constructivist agenda of the class, the first author built in many and varied opportunities for students to voice ideas, co-create assignments and assessments/rubrics, question content and rethink commonly accepted methodology for literacy instruction. Consideration of these opportunities which the first author called "Forums for Student Voices" (and become data sources for the study) demonstrated first, the ways that she negotiated a critical, constructivist agenda in her classroom and secondly, how students responded to and ultimately own this agenda. Table 1 presents course activities, provides a description and rationale for each and gives representative student comments as evidence of student voice in the classroom. The study looks closely at what privileging student voice means and how "listening" to and "hearing" students impacts the course as the semester unfolds.

As portrayed in Table 1, the first author invited students in multiple ways to co-create a classroom community wherein all voices matter. At the beginning of the course students seem puzzled by the provocative proposition and the format of the class. Some expressed doubt and exhibited discomfort in the first group-talk sessions. One student, Debbie, frequently implored in the early classes, "What is it you want us to talk about, Dr. Madden?". Questions and the need for teacher reassurance surfaced again and again as students argued for different ways to teach reading in collaborative papers, looking closely at literacy teaching by conducting school walkabouts, and review and critique accepted reading programs such as Orton Gillingham and SRA Reading

Data Source	Description	Representative Voices
Collaborative papers	Student triads write reflective/critique papers in which they grapple with course readings.	<i>Process and product most challenging experience of educational career.</i>
School Walkabouts	Students conduct school wide inquiry about their schools' programs for struggling readers and writers. Present findings using charts, brochures, videos, and photos.	<i>Took way too much time in class – thought sharing only 10 minutes... Difficult to execute due to time constraints and workload of course. Most of us simply reported facts and information we already knew about instruction and didn't have time to get into important issues as least constructive activity.</i>
Special Program Inquiries	Student pairs research a reading program for exceptional children and explain and demonstrate the program to class.	<i>Found overview of reading programs very useful. Length of presentations!</i>
In Class Conversation/ Dialogue	Instructor builds time to talk in groups about topics of choice into each class session. Groups frequently chart and share our thinking.	<i>Good teachers know how to lead discussions and get their students thinking rather than "spoon feeding knowledge" into them. By talking I become engaged and make personal connections to content. I've never had a graduate course that promoted learning from each other, not a book.</i>
Multi-Genre Presentations	Cumulative research presentation where individuals, pairs, or triads accept or refute the provocative proposition and present evidence to support their argument.	<i>Best project I have been involved in during both undergraduate and graduate studies.</i>
Weekly class reflections	Students anonymously provide written critique of class session and offer suggestions for change as well as pose questions for next class.	<i>To learn about more trade books that are good for lessons ... Maybe we could compile a list for pre K-8. Is proficient fully literate? Who creates the standards? More in class time to talk to one another.</i>
End of course questionnaire	Students and teacher complete in summer after course has ended and grades given.	<i>Course structure refreshing break from typical "lecture" format. Discussions and collaborative work made it easier to learn new strategies and understand ways to apply to my classroom.</i>
End of course student evaluations	University evaluation form to assess faculty teaching.	

**Table 1. Student representative voices from various data sources**

Mastery for special needs children. The first author intentionally responded to student uncertainty with, "I trust you to decide how you will complete the project. As long as you clearly support your arguments and show evidence of grappling with new ideas from our readings, your work will be fine."

After several class sessions and the first collaborative paper, students began to believe the first author; it was almost as if the class breath a collective sigh of relief. This change from anxious dependence on teacher direction to assuming greater responsibility for their work was seen in

class reflections: "We don't need to talk about requirements again ... too many people are being too analytical - making a mountain out of a molehill. I think you've explained several times ... Clearly!"

End of course questionnaire comments also pointed to emerging student understanding of what it means to direct one's learning and to co-exist with peers and teacher in a safe learning environment. One of the student, Curtis wrote:

*From the first time you step into the classroom, Midge created a very safe learning environment in which you were free and encouraged to express your ideas and questions. In some graduate classes especially ones that involve a lecture format, questions are answered but the real issues of what is being learnt are never discussed. Being comfortable in expressing your views and asking questions enables you to learn what is being taught ... And, at the course's end, I believe I knew everyone because I was speaking and discussing issues with them as colleagues, not as classmates.*

It is critical to understand here that in order to help students embrace or refute the provocative proposition, the first author structured the course as information and fact gathering during the first part, and action-driven during the second. Thus, the first few weeks and classes were spent in reading, discussing, and critiquing multiple texts around literacy instruction and exceptional children. Students talked in triads and wrote collaborative papers on topics of choice centering in some way around course readings. The second part of the course asked students to apply their co-constructed knowledge in real school situations, as described in Table 1. Across the course, the first author taught mini-lessons on vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and writing strategies, always inviting student question and critique. She encouraged students to share instructional strategies that have proved effective in their classes. And they frequently did.

Audiotapes and videotapes of class sessions, student written reflections, and teacher researcher journal comments across the semester indicated growing

student responsibility for holding class discussions, negotiating criteria for projects, and articulating questions and resultant thinking about new ideas. During the final weeks of the semester as students took full control of the classes and argued their propositions, the first author quipped, "You guys don't even need me any more!" Ken laughed, "Sure we do, Dr. M. You're in charge of AV equipment and bringing food and drink!" "And you can listen," smiled JoAnn. At the course's end, it was the teacher who listened and the students who instructed, newly informed by their knowledge and inquiries.

### ***They Want Me To Transmit But I Want Them to Construct: Students Share Power In A Children's Literature Course***

In a second course, a semester later, the second author attempted a constructivist critical pedagogy in an undergraduate course. Similar to the first author, she too pushed students to question and think critically about course content. "They Want Me to Transmit, but I Want Them to Construct" the concept behind this research story.

#### *Understanding the Course*

Twenty-four caucasian females and one caucasian male enrolled in an undergraduate children's literature course. The course, *Using Children's Literature in a Reading and Writing Classroom* prepared pre-service teachers to use quality literature in teaching language arts. Students learnt to write in various genres and how to develop thematic units of study. The course combined language, literacy, and learning by integrating children's literature across the curriculum.

The second author sought to change this course from one of content delivery to one of provocative questioning and critique. A major goal was also to help students develop a critical literacy perspective through the use of provocative and radical children's texts.

#### *Creating a Knowledge Base*

Students completed a pre-survey asking them to reflect upon their past experiences with literature. In responding to the survey, students recalled books read in school as well as listed favorite titles that they remembered from childhood. The survey results listed thirty-seven titles;

however, twenty-two titles were duplicated two or more times. Students mentioned only three authors: Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein and R.L. Stine.

Informed by the pre-surveys, the second author began by building a knowledge base in children's literature. Students read *Informing Our Practice: Modernist, Transactional, and Critical Perspectives on Children's Literature and Reading Instruction* (Serafini, 2004) to learn ways to think about interpreting texts. Using the three perspectives (modernist, transactional or critical), students ranked their reading instruction experiences and future instructional practices.

Many students stated that most of their elementary teachers followed a modernist perspective - the belief that meaning resides in the text (Eagleton, 1996). One student remembered that "...most instruction required little interpretation. We had to know the characters, and basic story line." Another student recalled, "I was basically taught that there was one right answer and one right meaning in a text."

Regarding teaching beliefs, most students embraced the transactional perspective, based on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory that meaning is constructed in the transaction between a particular reader and a particular text. A Student wrote:

*I guess I would say that I use the transactional perspective. I believe that although the writer has an idea in [his/her] head when they write a piece, it is up to the reader to interpret the writing.*

*I take a transactional stance in my instruction. I believe that students are actively engaged with the text, the reader and text of equal importance. I believe that students derive their own meaning from text based on their experiences and prior knowledge.*

But some students disagreed, arguing that the transactional theories while bringing depth to the discussion leave interpretation too open and the reader with a sense of something missing. And only one student came close to realizing reading from a critical perspective. She wrote:

*I believe that everything, from the way historical events are portrayed in history books to books about family life, is carefully written to reflect the "politically correct" social and political views that our society would like everyone to accept. What children are reading in public schools is written so that certain versions of reality are constructed to promote a particular view. That may not necessarily be what really happened, but is what our society would like us to think and accept. I believe a critical perspective on reading leads to many different interpretations where the readers construct the meaning themselves and are by no means passive.*

Overall, most student responses suggested they are at the beginning phase of developing a critical literacy perspective. Much work need to be done if these students are to understand that texts are constructed in social, political, and historical contexts which, in turn, position readers and texts and endorse particular interpretations.

The second author introduced the essential question: How can we use children's literature to develop a critical literacy perspective in elementary classrooms? And the provocative proposition: The children's literature selected by most classroom teachers often fails to create critical readers and writing. This essential question and provocative proposition drove much of the course content and activities.

## *Radical Children's Literature*

In pushing students to think critically about texts, it is imperative to use literature with a strong message and often strong, possibly disturbing language. To provoke emotional responses, students must listen to or read radical or provocative texts those that include story lines that address controversial or provocative issues. Three such texts that the second author found useful are *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, *The House that Crack Built* and *Whitewash*. The texts were presented in read alouds, after which the second author encouraged students to talk openly about their reactions. She facilitated rather than directing the talk ... and students had rich, often heated discussions.



*From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1998) depicts graphic scenes and powerful words that describe the African slave trade and the journey from Africa to the New World. Strong language, specifically the word "nigger" evokes emotional response. The author of the book presents scenarios forcing the reader to think about how they would react in various situations. The "N" word is used several times throughout the book.

Students used a responded chart to track their thinking about radical texts. They respond to six questions:

1. What are your initial reactions?
2. Would you use this book in your classroom?
3. What is something you wish to remember about this book?
4. What surprised you?
5. What question do you have about the book?
6. What connection can you make to today's world?

Many students stated that they would not use the book, and if they did, only in the upper grades (7th and above). Several of them expressed surprise that *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* is even categorized as children's literature because of the graphic descriptions and the strong language. One student wrote:

*I never realized literature could be so provocative and controversial for children. For example, using the word "nigger" in books. I don't ever remember reading this word in any books I read in school.*

Another read aloud, *The House that Crack Built* (Taylor, 1992), elicited similar responses. Hearing the title, more than half of the class thought literally, believing it would be about a house with a crack in it. On the contrary, this book is an alternative version to the traditional literature tale *The House that Jack Built* wherein the author discusses the spiral effects of the drug crack cocaine. Most students concurred that they would use the book only in the upper grades or in a district where drugs were prevalent in the community.

The third text discussed here and one of the last read alouds is *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997). This story tells of a

young black child who is painted white by the Hawks, a white gang, after they jump on her and her brother. At this point in the course, a shift in student response occurred. Students began to see the power and possibilities of such kind of texts. There were no longer responses arguing that these texts should not be used in younger grades; rather students asked how they can be used.

## *Teacher Observations*

The second part of the course sent students into elementary classrooms to observe teachers. Students documented what kind of texts teachers use and how they use these texts. Students became researchers and created a system to record their observations, attending closely to ways that teachers may be developing critical literacy perspectives in their classrooms.

Student observations revealed two categories of instruction: a) instruction is not developing critical readers and writers, or b) instruction has the potential for developing critical readers and writers, but teachers are not using the kinds of literature necessary to get them there.

One first grade teacher never used reading materials outside those suggested by her commercial reading series. She expressed hesitancy to use books that bring up serious topics such as racism, disabilities, drugs or violence:

*I would like to bring up some of those topics, but I am afraid that it would cause a backlash. I think that they would be good to talk about in class but the administration and parents would not allow it.*

When asked about a district policy for using radical texts in the classroom, the teacher could not comment. The student questioned this response later in her field notes:

*It appeared to me that the teacher is making excuses for not doing what she thinks would be beneficial to her students. She states that critical literacy is important yet she never allows students to discuss what was read... She says that first grade is too young for students to discuss such topics. But I disagree. First graders are still living in the real world and many may have already come face to face with*



*some of these issues. The classroom can provide a safe place for these students to talk about such topics.*

Another student found that instruction has the potential to develop critical readers and writers, but the texts used prevent it. Books that would push children to think and question remain on the shelf. The teacher responded to a question about using provocative texts in her instruction:

*I don't mind dealing with race and differences and feel it is necessary to talk about these topics with students. However, I address these issues only as they come; I don't go out of my way to bring them up.*

The student argued that this teacher has the potential to teach students to develop a critical literacy perspective. The teacher's questions encouraged students to reflect, predict and think more in-depth about books, but the books selected are very neutral. For example, the teacher read the book *We Are All Alike, We Are All Different* (2003) and asked "What does it mean to be alike and what does it mean to be different?" The children looked at one another and concluded that they are all different, but questioning what difference means never happened. After another read aloud, *I'm Gonna Like Me* (Curtis & Cornell, 2002), students named something they liked about themselves. General conversations, but no teacher questions pushed students to think beyond literal meanings.

The student questioned why books are not used to help children connect to their real lives. This particular school, in a low-income and ethnically diverse area, includes children who knew the realities of poverty and discrimination. Using books to encourage talk in a classroom community could help them better understand. Hearing a conversation between students while painting:

*Rachel: You know, my daddy's in jail.*

*Juan: Hey, my Pop Pop's in jail, too.*

after which they continued to paint and laugh the student wondered, "But do they understand?". She wrote:

*These kids deal daily with divorce, foster parents, parents in prison, language barriers, and financial*

*troubles. Shouldn't the teacher use literature that addresses these issues? Couldn't books help kids talk about the things happening in the world around them?*

Interestingly, this student had argued at the beginning of the course that radical texts should not be used with young children. At the end of the course, she shifted her thinking and strongly believed that young learners need to become active learners and processors of what happens in their surroundings. And she understood the role certain kinds of text can play in fostering this awareness.

*The ways in which student beliefs change:*

At the end of the course, students completed a survey inviting them to reflect upon their learning. Examples of questions asked follow:

*What do you believe now about developing a critical literacy perspective?*

*How have the books used in the course changed your thinking?*

*What has surprised you most during this course?*

Many students now agreed with the provocative proposition introduced at the course's beginning. The children's literature selected by most classroom teachers often failed to create critical readers and writing. They feared that had they not taken this course, they would have been one of the teachers selecting literature that failed to create critical readers and writers. Students' thinking shifted from using radical texts in middle and upper grades only to seeing the power of these books in the younger grades as well. One student's response evidenced this shift in thinking:

*Students learn so much outside of the classroom from watching television and their own personal experiences, so why do we have to shelter them from everything in the classroom? This course has opened my eyes to a new genre of books that I would have probably never considered using in my future classroom.*

Most students saw the books used in this course

inconsistent with their school experiences: “nothing like those of my own experiences” and “any book not written in a traditional “wholesome” and safe manner was not stocked in my school library” represented comments that were consistent across the class. Students felt disappointed, “ripped-off” as one said, and generally felt they had missed out or that their education had failed them. “Would I have a better understanding of tough issues?” “Would I have a different perspective on today's world?” Students argued that radical texts could provoke thinking and questioning about theirs and others' places in the world. They believed that exposure to social issues and inequities is important to help children grow up to be responsible and well-educated adults.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

Using the questions posed in the beginning of this paper as a framework, the authors discuss the findings of these two studies in constructivist classroom practice and their implications for teacher educators. The questions are:

1. In what ways do student beliefs about teaching literacy that develop over the course of the semester evidence a shift from passive receivers of instruction to co-constructors of a collaboratively mediated body of knowledge?
2. What do our students' evolving theories of practice tell about who they are and what they value as educators?
3. What new understandings of literacy teaching and learning do teacher educators gain when they take an inquiry stance on their practice?
4. What are the possibilities and constraints of enacting a constructivist literacy pedagogy in a traditional institution driven by adherence to standards and curriculum?

Each question and research findings are presented in the following sections.

### 5.1 Moving towards a constructivist classroom

Both the authors saw a radical shift from the traditional epistemological orientation in college classrooms to one of co-construction and student ownership of course content. Challenged to consider an essential question and take a stance on a provocative proposition in both courses, students understood from the beginning that the

course would be different. Both professors repeatedly sought to make their classrooms places where students and teacher would build knowledge together. Both invited students to critique and interrogate current practice.

The first author pushed students to investigate ways that their schools taught reading to exceptional children defined as classified students with learning difficulties. Each conducted school walkabout investigations, bringing back findings to the whole group. Students talked in small groups and wrote collaborative papers that critiqued accepted instructional practices used in most schools. They asked, “Why don't administrators and teachers seek new ways to teach failing children?” “What is the evidence that these students are becoming better readers?” In their final project, all students argued that schools do indeed fail to help exceptional children become fully literate. The students had become the experts at the end of the course; it was student talk and anger that characterized the classes at the end of the semester. The students had become proactive proponents of exceptional children and advocated for change in their classrooms and schools.

The second author's students had also critiqued classrooms. In looking for the use of radical texts, they saw little. They too expressed frustration that teachers could not better connect texts to students' lives. And they advocated for changes in literacy curriculums. As teacher, the second author's voice became less important; it was the students who expressed views and argued for ways to show the power of critical texts and thinking.

### 5.2 Students' evolving theories about teaching

One of the student's words at the end of the first author's class epitomize student learning in both courses: “Being comfortable in expressing your ideas and asking questions allows you to better learn what is being taught... and at the course's end, I believe I knew everyone because I was speaking and discussing issues with them as colleagues, not as classmates.” In discussing best practice for struggling readers, many “traditional” literacy

practices became problematic. Students questioned direct instruction as dominant method and many experimented with giving exceptional children voice and choice in the reading classroom. Several final projects showed highly motivated special education children reading texts with fluency, comprehension, and, most importantly, confidence and enthusiasm. These results suggest that as teachers become more knowledgeable about the theory and practice of reading instruction, they more frequently engage in risks and try out new, innovative ways of teaching.

The second author's students also shifted thinking about literacy practices. They questioned "traditional (e.g., safe)" literature and argued for radical or provocative literature in the elementary classroom. Simply learning to read was not enough. The second author's students believed that texts should invite children to think, grapple with ideas, and connect these ideas to their own lives and the broader world. In the end, students did not want to become the teachers they had observed.

### **5.3 Taking and inquiry stance on one's practice**

What new understandings of literacy teaching and learning do teacher educators gain when they take an inquiry stance on their practice? This third question suggests the changing perspectives of the authors as they created a constructivist classroom. Both the authors admitted to frequent feelings of insecurity and discomfort. Always questioning what they did, the authors slowly realized that the teacher educator does not have to be viewed as expert for learning to take place. Transcripts of student talk suggest that a great deal of learning had occurred in both classrooms; more importantly, students were able to clearly articulate this learning. Further, students in both courses argued and debated literacy practices, moving far beyond simple reiteration of instructional strategies. This student talk became more interpretive as the courses progressed, generating analyses or explanations, which suggests more significant learning gains than purely descriptive talk (Palincsar, 1998). Changing a traditional college syllabus into a curriculum of questions had indeed changed the nature of classroom talk and, consequently, the nature of

learning.

### **5.4 Constraints and Possibilities of a constructivist literacy pedagogy in a traditional institution**

Both the authors encountered similar constraints when trying to create and implement a co-constructed class. Engaging in interpretive talk demanded time, but often at the expense of complete coverage of course content. The authors also grappled with the political dilemma of accountability to the university and their students - Did the constructivist approaches that were used sufficiently prepare the students? "What kind of learning matters?" became the recurring question for both authors who repeatedly countered prevailing teacher perceptions of authentic learning. They argued that teachers must take a leap of faith, if they are to expect more from students, they must agree to new, innovative practices. However, such teaching is not easily accomplished. Both of them increasingly found that in order to fully realize the kind of community envisioned by constructivist pedagogy, teachers must have enormous savvy and craft in the fields' of both curriculum and classroom management. Two questions frequently surfaced and remain unresolved: (i) How can we best help students to understand new roles as co-constructors of knowledge?, (ii) In what ways can we move students to accept responsibility for their own learning?

The study also suggests several important implications for teaching and learning. Collaborative inquiry, if it can be achieved, and, as in the case of the two studies presented in this paper, offers a powerful way to deepen students' understandings about teaching. Further, the power of talk in such communities should not be overlooked. Both classrooms became places where students and teachers together critiqued and interrogated current instruction, and ultimately identified and learnt effective literacy practices.

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